

These Are the People in Your Neighborhood

An Honors Journal (HNRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jim Needham".

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Purpose of Thesis

This journal is about discoveries I found while creating a documentary on the homeless in Indianapolis. It covers the difficulty of finding a complete representation of the various ages and types of homeless people, the concept of homelessness as a separate society within society, the differences and distances between the two societies, the global importance of this issue and suggestions for solutions. This is not a "research paper", it is a personal journal of observations and thoughts I've had through taking time out to come "into their world" as the homeless would say. It is an attempt to look closely at the homeless problem, the people it involves and what could be done about it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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A special thanks goes to my partner, Dana Sheets, whose heart of gold and sense of reality helped bring this project to life. Her constant support and friendship made such a difference in the experience of the project. Also, my close friend Jon Little deserves a special thanks for always being there when I needed him and for providing the music to create the vision.

My final tribute is to my family who has been behind me all my life. I thought I understood how important they were to me before, but this project awakened a new understanding of just how lucky I have been to have them.

These Are the People in Your Neighborhood

I went into this project with naive stereotypes of the homeless, of what I would see and find and of what the causes for their situations would be. However, I've finished the project with open eyes that have absorbed parts of a different culture. It is said that you learn something new everyday, but in this case I learned something new every hour. What follows are my personal observations and conclusions, not a littering of facts or circumstances.

The project didn't go as smoothly as planned, nothing ever does. One of the main difficulties we ran into was in finding and talking to a variety of subjects. We had planned on representing all types of homeless people but we couldn't find any teenagers. We reasoned most teens were either in gangs and therefore did not need to come to the shelters or they were able to live with other family members. Adults seemed less likely to accept the hospitality of family because of the pride they had for themselves. The difficulty we had with the adults was that they didn't want to be videotaped. I assume they saw it as a "machine that lies," and that could portray them and their situation in a false manner. I also think privacy is part of the issue. Since they are homeless and do not have many personal possessions I think they felt we were trying to take away the last thing that was theirs -- privacy. Another thought that occurred to me was that our personal appearances created a barrier. Even though we "dressed down," I

became very aware of the real contrast we presented in their eyes with our clean hair and nails, freshly washed clothes, and white teeth. I am not saying they were afraid of us, I just felt we looked to them as though life had been good to us and I think this turned them off and made it harder for them to want to "help" us.

Being homeless and not being homeless create two separate societies. When people's basic needs are met, then they think about other material "necessities." For example, the homeless have daily struggles to find food, shelter and clothing and do not think about incidental things like what day they should go get their hair cut at the salon. For the homeless, life is a struggle to survive.

For those who aren't homeless life is a struggle to get ahead and earn more money. The non-homeless take for granted everything the homeless wish for every day. Such things as a house to call my own, fresh smelling sheets, a toaster for toasting an english muffin, and even the refrigerator for the jelly, are conveniences I expect to have daily. To me they are a part of "every day life."

But, no matter how separate these societies may seem people don't realize how close they are to falling into the same situation. This is very ironic because when people have homes and jobs they never worry about being without them. They always expect to at least have a home and job. But, a fire could burn down their house, they could get laid off from work and over time, use all of their resources, a natural disaster could strike, or a man-made disasters like Oklahoma City could unavoidably disable them and not allow them to work anymore. All of these examples could leave a

person homeless without anywhere to go. The frightening reality is that people who do have their basic needs met, are truly only one step away from having their life swept out from underneath them.

Another reason I feel being homeless creates a separate society is that the homeless have a different sense of reality than the non-homeless population. There seem to be different levels of morality that are in contrast between the homeless and non-homeless. For example, one "woman" (all of 19 years old) told us, on camera, that she and her husband were having trouble getting a home because they had to represent that she (not her husband) is the bread winner for the family. The reason they had to tell realtors that is because her husband is a drug dealer and they couldn't tell them his occupation or he would get caught. In the same breath she said he is a "good provider," which I assume means he is providing food and shelter, but the way he goes about providing it is questionable in my mind. Selling drugs as an occupation is not or never will be an option for me, but she obviously thought they weren't doing anything wrong. She and her husband had to live and this was the way they chose to do it.

Another example of conflicting realities came from this same woman. She told us, on camera again, that she didn't like her mother and she had tried to set her on fire three times but her mother always woke up before she died, or someone else put the fire out. Her mother thought her daughter had fallen asleep with a cigarette in her hand, and had no idea her daughter actually attempted to kill her in her sleep. What amazed me so much about

this woman telling us these secrets was that she didn't feel she was telling us that she was doing anything wrong. It was all said in a very nonchalant and unremorseful way. There wasn't an ounce of guilt in her tone of voice or the actions of her body, it just happened to be something she had tried that hadn't worked, like a child would sneaking an extra cookie and blaming it on a sibling. I am not trying to judge these people. I have no right. I am merely making comparisons between myself and the "world" I live in versus the "world" the homeless live in.

Also, ideas that, to me, are common sense were ideas that many of the homeless never knew until they learned through experience. One of the homeless women bought clothes and other luxuries before she paid the rent, so when it came time to pay the rent she had no money left. Which ties into budgeting. Many homeless have never made budgets before the shelters taught them how. These are things I've known. In fact, I can't remember ever being taught to budget or being told to pay rent before spending money on clothes. I was surprised to find the old cliché "people learn by example" being uncovered before my eyes. Most of the homeless have grown-up observing others who also don't know how to budget and who also choose to buy "luxury" items before paying rent.

Homelessness seems to be, not only a separate society, but a separate class of people. I didn't say a lower class or a worse class than any other "class" that exists, but the homeless are a different type of people. There is a pattern to their becoming homeless. It is a cycle that a person is either born into or

accidently falls into. For example, a homeless woman has a baby girl and the baby grows up homeless. The child watches and sees what her mother does to survive and learns her survival techniques. Unfortunately, more likely than not, this can and does lead to an early pregnancy, beginning the cycle anew.

Another way to become homeless is through the stereotypical way. Becoming an alcoholic or drug addict creates a situation that often results in people losing their jobs, homes and families, thus landing them on the streets. On the streets, people find ways to survive and to keep up their addictions. This creates a cycle most people cannot escape unless they understand they have a problem that needs "outside" help.

Through talking with the homeless people I have learned that a hierarchy exists within their "class." From my observations I can separate the class further into "motivated" and "unmotivated" homeless people. The motivated homeless, job hunt with the shelter's help and have expectations of being homeless for only a short period of time.

The motivated seem to have become homeless through indirect or unintentional causes. For example, one man we spoke with had a Master's degree from the University of Maryland and got laid off from his current job. This forced him to become homeless because he had no income to pay his rent. Another man was injured at work and was receiving disability checks that he lived on. The government reclassified him as not being disabled anymore and his benefits were terminated. He appealed the decision and won. Now

he is waiting for his check to come in the mail so he can find another apartment. One younger woman simply never learned to budget and became homeless by getting herself into debt because she overcharged all her credit cards and had to spend her income paying off the debt and not her rent. This situation is an example of a person making a bad choice and the results it brought.

The motivated homeless all seem to be educated enough to read, write and do simple math. They do not like the position they are in and are willing to work hard to change their situation. These were also the only people comfortable talking with us on camera.

The unmotivated seemed to be buried deeper in the cycle and expressed little hope for getting out. My unconfirmed speculation is that their educational attainment was much lower, their motivation levels were lower, and they would rather deal with their lives the way they are rather than work hard to change them.

The unmotivated homeless were never willing to be videotaped or interviewed, so we still haven't learned much about them. I would guess one of their reasons for not wanting to be on tape is the fear of who might see it. Perhaps the police might get a copy of it and would recognize one of them who might be involved in some type of illegal activity. Or, it may simply be an issue of privacy. I am only speculating, I do not know for sure.

The two societies also have different and distant cultures. The homeless and non-homeless hold very different viewpoints on similar subjects. The homeless see how much the non-homeless have and assume that life has been easy for them. The homeless see the

outcome, but do not recognize the hard work that went into being able to own a home and a car.

The non-homeless see the homeless as lazy, drug addicted people and forget to look at the hardships that might have caused them to become homeless.

The homeless do not trust the government or anyone associated with it. This is not to say that all non-homeless people readily trust government officials either, but among this group there seems to be a consensus that government provides essential services and therefore is needed. However, the homeless see the government as failing to do its job and not providing sufficient enough benefits or AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children). Also, the homeless believe the government is against them because the rich seem to get tax breaks and get richer; whereas the non-homeless often view the government as against them because so much money is given to welfare, AFDC and other social programs to help the poor.

Another obvious difference I observed is in lifestyles. For the homeless, "survival" is the goal in day-to-day living. They have a low economic level and their lifestyle focuses on meeting basic needs -- food, shelter and clothing -- and keeping themselves alive. For the non-homeless getting to work and making more money so they can move ahead in life is the goal to day-to-day living. They have a stable economic level and their lifestyle focuses on keeping themselves happy, usually through material possessions.

What amazes me most is the apathy about this issue on a worldwide basis. The matter of homelessness is not a local or

regional problem. It is a pressing concern all over this planet. A couple of observations I've made will illustrate what I mean. The causes of homelessness on a global problem include natural disasters, and economic states of foreign governments. Ethiopia is drought stricken and has been for as long as I can remember. The people there are impoverished. Ethiopians probably worry more about food than about having a home. None-the-less, they are homeless. The Kobe earthquake in Japan left thousands of people homeless as have other natural disasters such as hurricane Andrew which devastated southern Florida.

The other major factor in this dilemma is the economic situation of a country's government. For example, before the U.S.S.R. became democratic the government took care of its people. There were probably homeless people before the fall of Communism. However, the instability of the new government has left many more people without homes. Other governments that are much more stable still have an existing homeless problem. The United States, England, France, and probably every country existing on Earth have problems with homelessness. This occurs, in my opinion, because homelessness is the result of a multiplicity of problems such as: drug addictions, job loss, family models and poor education.

Although homelessness remains a global problem, for much of each year it is also an invisible global problem. Only at Christmas and at the onset of homelessness in other countries, is the world really focused on this problem.

Unfortunately, as soon as the problem becomes "old news" or the cold holiday months are over, it slips into oblivion.

What is the reason for this powerlessness? It is because the homeless have no social status, no representation, and no economic power. Why aren't there any interest groups lobbying in Washington or homeless representatives from each country accompanying their leaders to U.N. Conferences?

The homeless, although a large part of society, are not an active part of society. People do not actually talk to the homeless everyday. Non-homeless citizens see the homeless on the street and probably think, "why can't they get a job?" But people never sit down and ask questions or hold conversations with them. It is difficult, if not impossible to do.

The concerns of the homeless are not the same as other people's concerns. The non-homeless walking down the street, have their minds on how they are going to finish the big business proposal and still make it to their daughter's dance recital. They aren't worrying about where they will sleep, or when their next meal will be.

Not having anything in common with a person usually leads to the people not spending any time together or in listening to what the person has to say. This is exactly the situation with the homeless and non-homeless. The homeless don't take time to listen to Jane Doe's problems about getting to work and accomplishing everything she needs to do, and Jane Doe doesn't take time to

listen to how bad the government is and what could be done to help the homeless.

This brings me to my final area of discussion -- solutions. Communication is the key to making life work. If a business doesn't communicate with its consumers, it fails; if a husband and wife don't communicate, their marriage fails. Similarly, a solution for homelessness will fail without communication from the homeless as to what their needs are and communication from the non-homeless as to how they can help to meet those needs. For example, the homeless presume the non-homeless don't have any problems and if they do they're incidental like deciding whether to go to Janie's dance recital or to work late and finish the business proposal. What the homeless miss in that scenario is the dilemma between commitments the parent must choose between. Does the working mother finish the proposal and show her boss what a hard worker she is which eventually could lead to a promotion, or does she go to the dance recital and support her daughter? In this non-homeless scenario, the decision will affect her daughter and her work, either positively or negatively, depending on what she decides. On the other hand, the non-homeless don't take time to listen to the reasons why the homeless are homeless. Granted, some stories fit the stereotype drug addict, but many are stories of bad luck, or of occurrences they couldn't control. For example, the one man got hurt on the job and has to wait for his appeal to go through before he can get his disability benefits and pay rent

again. Each side has very valid points, but to find a solution each must know the needs and limitations of the other.

Some possible solutions I've thought of include making volunteer work mandatory to graduate from junior high and high school, thus sensitizing children early on to the problem and how it can be helped. Not only would this sensitize the public to the problem at an early age, but it would give hope and help to the homeless and spread awareness of the situation. For adults, there could be days they don't go to the office but instead volunteer at a homeless shelter and still get paid. Employers could award differing amounts of bonuses depending on how much volunteer time an employee had done.

For the homeless I suggest education as the "solution". We need to try to keep their children in school. Perhaps by offering the top 10 percent of the graduating class scholarships to college, or other monetary incentives a friendly competition would be created and would add to homeless children wanting to stay in school. Also, teachers could spend days volunteer teaching and help the adult homeless population to become literate and able to do basic math and writing skills so they could get a job.

My final suggestion to help relieve this problem rests with sex education. All young Americans, including the homeless, need to be given detailed information about birth control, diseases and how easily they can be caught and the emotional consequences to having sex too young. By preventing teen pregnancies perhaps the poverty cycle can be broken. Also, teaching about the emotional

effects of sex at a young age and how harmful the experience can be to self-esteem will make children think before they jump into bed together! The sex education classes I went through never touched on the emotional area. From people I've talked to who have had sex at a young age the reason they did was because of their emotions. They said they were "in love" or they were looking for someone to love and who will love them and sex became that outlet. These people also said after having sex with one person, they thought they had to sleep with each boyfriend after that so the boy would "love" them. That is my point about self-respect and self-esteem.

My feelings are strong about this subject. The reader should understand, however, I am not asking you or anyone else to take responsibility for these people and the situation they are in.

Every person, including those who are homeless, has choices. With each decision, they either make a good choice or bad choice and their life is affected by what they do. It is "their" problem and only they can get themselves out. But it is our responsibility to listen, to care and to try to help. After that, it is up to their own will power and dreams to keep them moving in a forward direction.

In a capitalistic society there will always be different levels of economic wealth. Because it is a comparative means, there will always be poor people and rich people, but perhaps one day when the world becomes ideal, we won't have homelessness anymore.

I've learned that it doesn't take much, only a second of my time, to affect another human being in such a way that I renew their hope and their motivation to keep going. One homeless man said to us that we were more qualified to teach than any other teacher because we took the time to experience the situation, to care about the people involved.

He thanked us for that "caring." I don't believe I've ever had anyone thank me for caring about them before. People have thanked me for Christmas gifts, birthday presents, and for doing favors, but never just a simple, "thanks for caring." And that thought truly amazed me. I've learned the valuable lesson of knowing that I have to experience (in some small way) what a person is going through in order to help them. This is not done by the rule makers of this country as often as it should be. Finally let me say that I have learned more about life and people during this project than I did the first year of college. My teachers were the homeless, the ones who made poor choices -- choices that link them and their tragedies to you and me, and I, for one, will never forget or stop caring.